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**Opening Extract from...**

# Local Girl Missing

Written by Claire Douglas

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# Local Girl Missing

CLAIRE DOUGLAS



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# THURSDAY

# 1

# Frankie

*February 2016*

It's a dreary afternoon, just after lunch, when I finally find out that you're dead.

When the mobile on my desk vibrates with an unrecognised number I pick it up, distracted by the mountain of paperwork I'm immersed in.

'Is this Francesca Howe?' A male voice burns a hole in my memory. His warm country timbre doesn't belong in my office on the top floor of my parents' hotel, with its minimalist furniture and views of the Gherkin. It belongs in the past; to our hometown in Somerset where seagulls squawk at dawn, waves crash against the pier and the smell of fish and chips permeates the air.

'Daniel?' It comes out as a croak and I grip the edge of the desk with my free hand as if to anchor myself to this room, to the present, so that I don't go spinning head first into the past.

There can only be one reason why he's calling me now, after all these years.

It means there is news. About you.

'Long time,' he says, awkwardly. How did he get my number?

My legs are as weak as a new foal's as I stand up and

stagger over to the rain-splattered window that overlooks the city. I can feel the air filling up my lungs, hear my ragged breathing. 'Is this about Sophie?'

'Yes. She's been found.'

My mouth fills with saliva. 'Is she . . . is she alive?'

A beat of silence. 'No,' his voice cracks and I try to picture what he looks like now, your big brother. Back then he was tall and skinny, permanently dressed in black with matching hair and a long pale face. Unhealthy-looking, like a vampire in a teen film. I can tell he's struggling to retain his composure. I don't think I've ever seen him cry; not when you first went missing, not even when the police decided to give up the search after days of trawling the undergrowth and sending boats out to sea, or when the public lost interest after one of your navy blue Adidas trainers was found at the edge of the deserted pier and it was assumed you had fallen in to the Bristol Channel and been swept away by the tide. When everyone apart from us began to forget all about you, Sophie Rose Collier, the sometimes shy, often funny, twenty-one-year-old girl from Oldcliffe-On-Sea who disappeared from a club late one night. The girl who cried at the old BT adverts on the TV, who fancied Jarvis Cocker, who couldn't open a packet of biscuits without scoffing them all. He clears his throat. 'The remains of a body have been found, washed up in Brean . . . it fits her description. It's her, Frankie, I know it.' It feels strange to hear him call me Frankie. You always called me Frankie too. I haven't been 'Frankie' for years.

I try not to imagine what you must look like after nearly two decades floating in the sea, or what part of you they've discovered among the debris on the shores of Brean

Sands. But I can't stop myself wondering if it was a foot, neatly severed at your delicate ankle, or a long tanned arm. I hate to think of you that way.

You are dead. It's a fact. You are no longer just missing, I can't delude myself into believing that you've lost your memory and are living it up somewhere, maybe Australia, or more likely Thailand. We always wanted to travel, do you remember our plans to go backpacking around South-East Asia? You hated the cold winter months. We would spend hours dreaming about escaping the biting winds that whistled through the town, shaking the bare branches of the trees and throwing sand in our paths so that we could feel the grit of it between our teeth. Oldcliffe out of season was grey and depressing without the tourists to add the much needed hustle and bustle.

I finger the collar of my shirt away from my throat. I can't breathe. Through my partially open door I can see Nell tapping away at her computer, her red hair piled on top of her head in an intricate bun.

I move back to my desk, slumping on to the swivel chair, the phone hot against my ear. 'I'm so sorry,' I say, almost to myself.

'It's OK, Frankie.' I can hear the whistle of wind in the background, the whoosh of tyres parting puddles, the indecipherable chatter of passers-by. 'It's not like we didn't expect it. Prepared ourselves for it.' What city or town is he calling me from? Where did your big brother end up? 'Her remains need to be formally identified. Things are difficult because of how long . . .' He takes a deep breath 'because of how long she's been in the water. But they are hoping by the middle of next week.'

It crosses my mind that there might not be much of you left to identify. 'Do the police . . .' I swallow down bile. 'Do they know how she died?'

'They're still saying the same thing, that she was drunk, that she fell into the sea, that she shouldn't have been on that pier. Death by misadventure. You know the score.' A note of anger creeps into his voice. 'But I don't believe it. I think someone knows more about that night, Frankie. I think someone knows what happened to my sister.'

My fingers itch to pull at my hair. Instead I move a paperweight around my desk, straighten a framed photograph of me astride a pony with my father standing proudly beside me, a territorial smile on his face. I was always Francesca to him. 'What makes you say that?'

'The night she disappeared, she was afraid. She said somebody was out to get her.'

Blood rushes to my ears. I grip the phone tighter. 'What? You never mentioned that before.'

'I told the police at the time but they dismissed it. She was jittery, paranoid. I assumed she'd taken a dodgy tab, you know how many drugs were flying about the place at the time. But Sophie would never have taken drugs. I know that. I've always known it deep down. She was a good girl. The best.' His voice catches.

He doesn't know about the time we both took speed at Ashton Court Festival, does he, Soph? You made me promise not to tell him as we sat there watching Dodgy, talking nineteen to the dozen and getting more and more paranoid with every passing minute.

I close my eyes, remembering that last night. You were standing in the corner of The Basement watching everyone

jumping up and down to 'Born Slippy'. The date is etched in my memory; Saturday 6th September 1997. I was on the other side of the dance floor chatting to the DJ but when I looked back through the fug of smoke that constantly hung in the air, you had disappeared, vanished in the throng. You hadn't looked scared, or particularly worried. If there had been a problem you would have confided in me. Wouldn't you?

I was your best friend. We told each other everything.

'Will you help me, Frankie?' he says, his voice suddenly urgent. 'I need to find out what happened to her. Someone knows more then they're letting on. The pier . . .'

'The pier was rotten, dangerous, closed to the public . . .'

'I know. But that didn't stop us all going there, did it? I just can't believe she went by herself. There must have been someone with her that night . . .' I can hear the desperation in his voice and my heart goes out to him. It's been difficult for me over the years not to constantly relive that night. But for your brother, it must have been unbearable at times. All those unanswered questions swirling around in his mind, keeping him awake at night, preventing him from moving on with his life. 'People don't want to talk to me about it. But you, Franks. You could get them talking.'

Of course he's going to do this for you. Always the protective big brother. I'd expect nothing less.

'I don't know. I've never been back, not since we moved to London . . .' The thought fills me with dread. Throughout my adolescent years I longed to escape the claustrophobic seaside town we grew up in, where, more often than not, three generations of the same family lived and you were thought of as odd if you had aspirations to leave.

The town where a dark secret of the past is never forgotten.

Or forgiven.

'Please, Frankie. For old time's sake. She was your best friend. You knew all the same people, ran with the same crowd. Don't you want to know what happened to her?'

'Of course I do,' I say. Could I really return after eighteen years? I'd vowed never to set foot in that town again. But what choice did I have? I suppress a resigned sigh. 'When do you want me to come back?'

I shoulder on my red wool coat and inform Nell in my most crisp, convincing voice, that I'm not feeling well and need to go home. She stares at me in wide-eyed shock because I'm never ill. But I ignore her looks of concern, and head out of the office, scurrying through the rain as fast as I can in my too-high heels and tight pencil skirt, to hail a cab. My head is still reeling as I sink into the back-seat, the leather cold against my calves as it heads to Islington.

The finality of your death suddenly hits me.

It's over.

And then I recall the phone conversation with Daniel and his calm insistence that I return to Oldcliffe to help him excavate the past and I suppress a shudder.

It's never going to be over.

I remember when I first ever saw you, Soph. It was September 1983 and we were seven. It was your first day at our primary school and you stood in front of the class with our teacher, Mrs Draper, and you looked so forlorn,

so lost, with your lank hair and blue National Health glasses. Your not-quite-white socks fell down your skinny legs so that they pooled around your ankles. You had a grubby-looking plaster covering one of your knobbly knees and the hem of your green school skirt was coming down. When Mrs Draper asked for someone to volunteer to be your buddy, my hand shot straight up. You looked like you needed a friend . . .

The house seems unusually cavernous and tidy as I let myself in, as if I'm seeing it through new eyes, through your eyes. What would you think now? Would you look at my three-storey town house and say I've done well for myself? Or would you tease me in that way you always used to, with that sardonic smile on your face that was so like Daniel's, and tell me I'm still a daddy's girl?

I pause in front of the hallway mirror and a professional thirty-nine-year old woman stares back at me. My hair is still dark and glossy with no hint of grey thanks to my hairdresser, and I have a few fine lines around my green eyes. Would you think I look old? You probably would. Ageing is something you'll never have to worry about. You'll always be fixed in time as young and fresh-faced. Forever twenty-one.

I turn away from my reflection. I need to start packing. I run upstairs to my bedroom. Daniel has already organised a place for me to stay. A friend of his owns a holiday apartment, and, as it's February and out of season, I can have it at a discounted rate. I'll drive down in the morning.

I need to be doing something constructive. I pull my Louis Vuitton hold-all from the top of the wardrobe and

leave it open on the bed. Questions speed through my mind like galloping racehorses. How many days should I pack for? How long is this going to take? Then a new thought hits me. How am I going to explain all this to Mike?

I'm in the basement kitchen, frantically peeling and chopping when I hear Mike call out a hello. He fitted this kitchen for me last year, as a favour, before we got together, although I knew him before that, when he helped renovate the new hotel. Solid and strapping, with sandy hair and a strong jaw, I'd been instantly attracted to him, despite having nothing in common. Now the shiny white glossiness of the units and the thick Corian worktops remind me of us; it all looks so clean and new on the outside, but on the inside the hinges are loose and there is a crack in one of the cabinets.

The radio is turned up loud and I allow Rachmaninov to wash over me, to soothe my frayed nerves. A large glass of Merlot is also helping. I've already put two washes on, packed for tomorrow and made a start on the stew for dinner. Mike looks puzzled, not only to find me home – I'm usually still in the office until late – but to find me cooking.

'Are you OK, Fran?' Fran. Much more grown up than Frankie or Franks. Fran conjures up someone sophisticated, someone mature, someone far removed from the Frankie of my past. 'Are you crying?'

'It's just the onions,' I lie, wiping my hands on my apron and going over to him. I reach up and kiss his still-tanned cheek, enjoying the roughness of the bristles on his chin. He smells dusty, of bricks and concrete.

He pushes me gently away from him. 'I'm filthy, I need a shower.' He sidesteps me and leaves the room. A few minutes later I can hear the gush of the shower overhead.

Over dinner I tell him about you.

'I've never heard you mention her before,' he says through a mouthful of beef and carrots. It's true that I've never told anyone about you, Soph. Not Mike, my work colleagues, the few friends I allow myself, not even my ex-husband. We were – are – so intrinsically linked that to talk of you would be to acknowledge the old me. I needed to make a fresh start, to wipe the slate clean. It was the only way I could cope with what happened.

I take a large gulp of wine. 'She was my best friend growing up,' I say, as I place the glass on the table with an unsteady hand. I pick up my fork and prod at a potato so that it sinks further into the gravy. 'We were so close, joined at the hip as my mother used to say. But Sophie went missing eighteen years ago. I found out today that her body – her *remains* – have been recovered.' I put my fork down. I have no appetite.

'After all this time? What a shitter.' He shakes his head as if contemplating how much of 'a shitter' it really is, and I can't read what's going on behind those pale eyes. I think, *I hope,* he's going to ask me about you; how we met, how long we knew each other, what you were like, but he doesn't. He'll never know that when we were nine we made up a dance routine to Madonna's 'True Blue'; that you were the first person I told after I kissed Simon Parker behind the bike sheds when I was thirteen; that you poured your heart out to me about missing the dad you could barely remember; that, once, I made you laugh so much

when you were sitting on my shoulders that you peed down my neck. Instead I swallow these little truths of our friendship down with my red wine while Mike resumes eating, methodically chewing the beef, around and around in his mouth like a cement mixer. I have the sudden urge to throw my drink in his face, just to provoke a reaction. My friend Polly always says that Mike is so laid back he's horizontal. A cliché perhaps, but it's true. I don't think he's being cruel, he just lacks the emotional capacity to cope with me, or rather, with my issues.

I wonder if it's occurred to him yet that our relationship isn't working. I regret asking him to move in, but he had caught me at a weak moment and I felt sorry for him, I suppose, living in that rundown house in Holloway with students half his age. And then, three weeks ago, just as I was about to sit down with him and admit that our relationship wasn't working, I received the call from Mum about Dad's stroke. I should have taken my dad's advice. He always warned me to be careful asking guys to move in, telling me that it's hard to get rid of them once you've invited them to share your home, your life, that you become intricately bound, financially and emotionally, like two threads tied in a knot. I haven't got the energy now to extricate myself from this relationship, to pick apart that knot. I get up from the table and scrape my food into the bin.

I tell Mike my plans as we get ready for bed.

'Sophie's brother, Daniel, is organising an apartment for me to stay in. A holiday let,' I say as I step out of my skirt and throw it over the back of the bedroom chair.

He's sitting up in bed, his muscly, almost hairless, chest is bare. I still fancy him. I still care about him, I just know our relationship isn't leading anywhere. 'At such short notice?' He raises a bushy eyebrow, watching me as I unbutton my shirt.

I shrug. 'It's out of season, and you know how I feel about staying in hotels.' After spending most days working in one, the last place I want to stay is in a hotel or guest house. It needs to be self-catering and self-contained, away from others.

'Why now? You said she's been missing for eighteen years. Why wait until now to find out what happened?'

I feel the prickles of irritation crawling up my spine. How can Mike even begin to understand any of this? How can he not see that your body being found is a game-changer? 'Because now we know for definite that she's dead,' I snap.

He looks taken aback. 'I've never been to Oldcliffe-On-Sea,' he muses, picking at a non-existent spot on his upper arm. If he's hinting to accompany me I ignore it.

'You're not missing much.' I pull a silk camisole over my head. There is no way I want him to come with me. I need some breathing space.

'It must have been fun growing up by the seaside.'

I smile stiffly, trying not to shudder at the memory of growing up in that pastel pink monstrosity overlooking the sea. Thank goodness Dad had the good sense, and money, to sell up and buy a place in London before the property boom. I tug back the duvet and slide into bed next to him.

'So, how long will you be gone?' He pulls me close, nuzzling my neck. His feet feel cold against my calves.

'Not long,' I say, switching off the lamp. 'I'm hoping just a few days. I can't leave the hotels for too long, not now that Dad's . . .' I swallow. I still can't bring myself to say the words. My dad, always so strapping, so capable, now reduced to a shadow of his former self as he lays, day after day, in that hospital bed, unable to speak, hardly able to move. It still feels too recent, too raw. I inch away, feigning tiredness and turn my back to him.

I lie still, waiting until I hear his rhythmic snores, his limbs heavy against mine, before grabbing my dressing gown from the back of the door and tiptoeing downstairs to sit at the kitchen table in the dark. I pour myself another glass of red wine. The smell of beef stew still lingers in the air. The little red light on the dishwasher flashes and beeps to let me know it's completed its cycle. It sounds strangely alien in the dark empty room.

I've tried so hard, over the years, to keep my life in order, to be successful, to move on, to not think about you every day. It's as though I've been cocooned inside a ball of wool, but now that wool has started to unravel, and when it does, I'll be laid bare, for all the world to see.

*Jason*. His name pops into my head, unbidden.

I take a large slug of wine but it doesn't stop my heart palpitating. Because the truth is bound to come out, Soph, and with it the dark secret we kept back then; the one thing we could never tell anyone else. Ever.